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The Land Warfare Domain: A Determining Factor in High-Intensity Conflicts

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Some assertions, due to their convenience, repeat themselves until they appear to be truths. One such assertion contends that technology has transformed warfare so radically that large-scale land operations belong to the past. It suggests that precision missiles and bombs, drones, and cyberspace have rendered territorial control unnecessary. It argues that armed forces will win future wars from a distance, cleanly, without the brutal cost of deploying soldiers on the ground. This idea is highly attractive and convincing; however, it is fundamentally incorrect.

Modern warfare depends on many factors and on the integration of different components: the tools that leaders have had at their disposal over time. However, some constants remain unchanged. Events in Ukraine and the Middle East leave little room for ambiguity, because when objectives carry political significance, when the survival of a state, control of territory, or the imposition of one will upon another is at stake, war returns to land. This has been true throughout history, and today represents no exception, at least for now.

ILLUSION AND REALITY IN HIGH-INTENSITY WARFARE

Operation Desert Storm in 1991, with its display of precision-guided capabilities and overwhelming air superiority, seemed to inaugurate in a new era. Kosovo in 1999 seemed to confirm it: bombing campaigns without friendly casualties, the adversary's capitulation, and an apparently surgical victory. Libya in 2011 became another act in that narrative.

What technological enthusiasm tended to ignore is that all those cases involved adversaries under very specific conditions: limited capacity for prolonged resistance, no real strategic depth, and, in several cases, internal political dynamics that had already weakened them before the first missile struck. It is also worth remembering that in 1991 a devastating land force deployed against Iraq, and that the former Yugoslavia faced the concrete threat of a land invasion.

Lawrence Freedman has warned about this for decades: war is a political instrument, not an engineering exercise. The enemy does not capitulate because its radar was destroyed; it capitulates when it perceives that its political options have been exhausted and that the cost of continuing exceeds the cost of defeat. That perception almost always requires more than just an air campaign or a maritime blockade.

This analysis does not seek to ignore or diminish the role of the domains that complement the land domain—maritime, air, space, and cyber—but to place them in perspective. For instance, air power possesses a capacity for degradation that no other domain can match: it can destroy infrastructure, deny mobility, and disrupt logistics chains. However, by itself it cannot control territory, administer a population, or impose a new political order. That requires someone on the ground. A maritime blockade can have devastating consequences for the adversary's economy and even for the global economy. However, it does not necessarily break the state's will to fight, at least not in days or weeks, which prolongs operations with potential economic, political, reputational, and military costs of one's own, potentially undermining the strategy itself.

The conflict in Ukraine has become the costliest and most exhaustive experience of high-intensity land warfare in the twenty-first century. Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), have rigorously documented how this war has confirmed the centrality of the land domain in ways that trouble those who bet on technological primacy.

Russia had air and naval superiority. It has fired thousands of missiles and used countless long-range drones against civilian infrastructure. Yet it has not been able to break the Ukrainian people's will to fight. The reason is relatively simple to understand: Russia has not achieved sustained control of the territory it needs to impose its political objectives. The front lines are measured in meters gained or lost at devastating cost, in which offensive maneuvers have crashed not only against Ukrainian innovation, but also against the combination of infantry resistance, artillery, and armor defending physical and real positions on the ground, supported by technological devices that multiply the effectiveness of maneuver and positional combat.

Ukraine, in turn, has demonstrated something equally instructive from the opposite side. It has severely degraded the Russian Black Sea Fleet with relatively modest means, while denying the use of airspace through progressively more sophisticated defense systems. But even those notable victories in other domains have not altered the conflict's center of gravity, which remains the control or loss of concrete territories: cities, roads, rivers, and high ground. Everything else, however relevant, remains complementary to that fundamental question.

The integration of drones, satellite intelligence, and long-range precision fires has been decisive in Ukraine, but its central purpose has been to support the operations conducted by soldiers in a context of constrained human and material resources. The experience gained from those who lead and conduct operations indicates that the intention is not to replace them; this distinction matters.

The recent conflict in the Middle East adds another case that serves the analysis. Decades of air campaigns against state and non-state actors in the region have produced real tactical results: arsenals destroyed, command networks degraded, and leadership eliminated. What they have not generated on a sustained basis is the intended political collapse.

The Iranian case is symbolic. Despite repeated attacks on its nuclear facilities, military infrastructure, and chain of command, the regime has maintained its capacity to operate, influence the region, and preserve internal control. The reason is rather structural and relates to the fact that it has forces on the ground, influence networks in neighboring countries, and severe control over the population, which grant it a resilience that precision fires, however intense, fails to completely dismantle. All this occurs without considering the economic cost that offensive efforts of this nature entail, a cost that few powers—perhaps only the United States—can sustain over time.

The same occurs in the maritime space; the destruction or degradation of a conventional navy has not prevented actors with asymmetric capabilities—anti-ship missiles, naval drones, mines, coastal control—from threatening critical routes like the Strait of Hormuz or the Red Sea.

Forces do not establish mastery of the sea solely on the ocean; they also establish it on the coast, in ports, and along the land corridors that control those waters. Without forces on the ground to secure those points, naval dominance weakens. After months of operations and the largest U.S. military deployment in the Middle East in years, the passage of merchant vessels remains restricted in the Persian Gulf. Not even the world's most powerful navy has been able to lift that blockade.

Franz-Stefan Gady, a defense analyst and expert adviser, highlights something often lost in technology-centric analyses: the cumulative character of land warfare. Strategic effects do not come from a single, decisive blow, but from sustained campaigns of confrontation that erode the adversary's will and capacity while consolidating one's own control.

WHAT ONLY LAND FORCES CAN DO

Certain functions remain exclusive to the land domain. Land forces—which are not limited exclusively to armies—control territory effectively and sustainably, secure infrastructure nodes, administer populations, and generate the political effects that make military results permanent. They interact with local communities, civil authorities, and the social structures that determine whether a state functions or collapses. A missile can destroy a building; it cannot administer a city.

Recent experience highlights an additional factor: in environments where the adversary denies access to airspace or the maritime domain, dispersed and protected land forces, integrated into the terrain or mixed with the population, possess a capacity for survival and combat continuity that high-cost systems cannot always guarantee.

None of the aforementioned equates to denying the importance of air, naval, cyber, or space power. The contemporary battlefield is undoubtedly multidomain; the war in Ukraine has shown the extent to which drones, commercial satellites, electronic warfare, and cyberspace shape combat.

The primary error lies not in failing to recognize that complexity, but in concluding that all domains carry the same weight when it comes to achieving political objectives.

The relevant distinction lies between means and ends. Depending on the objectives, strategies articulate the necessary means. There will be occasions when air power predominates, others when maritime power, or even cyber power, does. However, in most high-intensity conflicts, the land domain defines the most relevant objectives: what territory one holds or loses, which state retains the ability to govern, and which forces continue operating. As long as politics remains organized around states, territories, and populations —and everything indicates that it will— the land will remain the domain where results crystallize. In this context, the air, maritime, space, and cyber domains make a decisive and irreplaceable contribution through their capacity to detect, degrade, deny, and disrupt.

WHAT THIS IMPLIES

The temptation to overinvest in flashy technological niches—cyber capabilities, long-range drones, precision missiles—as a substitute for robust land forces can generate dangerously unbalanced force structures, vulnerable to precisely the type of coercion that recent conflicts have brought back to the forefront.

Each state must adapt to its own context and particular needs, according to its budgetary reality, culture, national identity, and, of course, strategic environment. Authorities hold the duty to ensure the defense and promotion of national interests, but not all these interests carry equal weigh. Exports and international trade are essential for a country’s development and prosperity; however, when confronted with the defense of sovereignty and the survival of the state, the hierarchy is unequivocal. That hierarchy must guide force-planning decisions: the main investments must serve non-negotiable vital ends.

The lines of action suggested by current evidence point to the need for balanced forces, with components and capabilities across all domains. Recognizing this, three priorities stand out: first, investing in land capabilities and resilience, because technically advanced units are not enough if they cannot sustain casualties, regenerate, and operate in prolonged campaigns. Evidence has seemingly displaced the notion of short-duration conflicts. Projecting national power over long distances lacks logic if a nation cannot first protect its own sovereignty. Second, effectively integrating precision and intelligence capabilities to support joint maneuver, rather than treating them as an end in themselves. Third, conceiving the protection of strategic infrastructure—ports, border crossings, logistical corridors, key urban areas—from a land-based logic as well, utilizing forces with doctrine, training, and command structures adapted to complex environments.

Consequently, for minor powers, capability development must seek a balance that enhances joint employment, but it must unfailingly prioritize what their reality and context demand, starting with the defense of their vital interests, followed by critical ones, and finally, important ones. Territorial control grants projection over the sea, the air, and outer space. Land warfare remains a determining factor; it never ceased to be one, and no excuse exists to continue ignoring it.

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